

# Subversive media: when, why, and where

by Chuck Kleinhans



Sergei Eisenstein's *October*: the storming of the Winter Palace. There was an annual re-enactment of the event and the director filmed the anniversary celebration.



Zack Snyder's *300*: The Spartans face off against the enemy's fearsome Battle Rhino.

## Contingent

Because subversion or opposition begins with difference, with being “the opposite” of the dominant, the normal, it is easy to slip into the thought that anything that is different is then in fact subversive.[1] [[open endnotes in new window](#)] That posits an abstract dominant and imagines an abstract resistance. But the historical world is much more complex than that. And what something “really is” is itself always contingent, that is dependent on time and place, on an evolving situation. That’s the more difficult thing to grasp because it means not thinking about “essence” but rather thinking about “process.” About change.

We might remember that in the darkest days of the rise of Nazi Germany, driven into exile Bertolt Brecht wrote about what kind of message politically committed artists could make in their work. He said that under the

circumstances the most radical thing that could be said within Germany was to speak of change. Against Hitler's Thousand Year Reich, the artist could simply say that things will change, that the future will be different. I think we can use that thought today as well. In a time when the campaign slogan, "Change We Can Believe In," seems pretty worn out even to Obama's liberal supporters, what can we imagine? What new change can we imagine and work for?

One great advantage of media art—of sound and moving image based art—is that it is essentially, inherently a time art, and time is dynamic. Media art almost always accommodates and implies change: of time, of place, of rhythm, of things represented or expressed. Time arts lend themselves easily to the representation of change. To understand this with more depth, it means that we can see "subversive"—that which is against the existing dominant order—as always contingent. Subversiveness depends on multiple relations, on multiple factors, and those things are in process, changing.

To be subversive, artists are often inspired to find new forms to express new ideas. The traditional ways are not working. And new forms can and do have a certain shock effect. They are startling, attention-getting, and in turn can confuse or shock audiences used to and comfortable with traditional forms. Sometimes this leads to thinking that formal shock is in and of itself subversive, rather than seeing artistic innovation more accurately as a means to achieving a more sophisticated end, one with a more historical view, a longer view. Not just shock for shock's sake, but thinking of the aftermath, the lasting effect.

To unpack my argument a bit more: I'll put forward three propositions, and then test them with an example.

**One.** A radical form can be a powerful expressive means, but it does not guarantee a truly subversive artwork. The formalist fallacy confuses a device, a technique, a style, with its effect.

**Two.** A powerful or shocking content can produce a spectacular reaction for the viewer, but that does not automatically make it deeply meaningful or politically effective.

**Three.** An artist's Sincere Intention, especially when delivered with strong sentiment, does not guarantee a truly subversive artwork. Intention is not meaning. Sincerity is not enough.

First, I want to test these three ideas against a well-known recent rap music video, "No Church in the Wild."<sup>[2]</sup> It is five minutes long and performed by Jay Z and Kanye West with Frank Ocean and The-Dream. The song was the opening track on a new collaborative album, *Watch the Throne* (2012), and the music video has received over 30 million views on YouTube as of this writing.

I'm not an expert on rap music and I won't try to discuss the music, the vocal performances, and the way the specific song fits into the careers of its two central performers. But I will note that Kanye West in particular contributed a

new strain to rap by taking on issues more typically seen in religious themed art: such personal morality, conventional pieties. The title itself, “No Church in the Wild,” refers to a trope found in some branches of Christianity, pointing out that Jesus himself did not have a church and thus calling into question the need for an institutional church, such as the Church of Rome. The song’s lyrics include typical rap themes: positing an authenticity in solidarity with one’s fellows, and opposition to the dominant order, celebrating rule-breaking hedonism and brotherhood, and drug use. The distinctive Kanye West themes are rejection of formal religion and conventional pieties (e.g., monogamy). But more important than specific details or lines in the song are the vocal performances of Jay Z and Kanye West who dominate the audio, presenting themselves as strong black men who are in control, in charge, aggressive, and self asserting. This mode of presentation fits West’s star image, in particular, which includes well-known public scenes of his extreme macho behavior and arrogant declaiming.

The song was released as part of a complex marketing strategy (detailed in Wikipedia),[3] that released different album tracks in stages leading to a full album release. The music video followed later. The film was made autonomously without the onscreen presence of West or Jay Z. Romain Gavras, son of the 1960s-70s director Costa Gavras, produced it in Prague. The visuals show an all male street confrontation between heavily armored riot police and a crowd of protestors who attack and are attacked in turn. At some moments the lyrics seem to be (vaguely, associatively) linked to an image, or an image seems to echo/reinforce/connect with lyrics. But there are many in which there is no connection. This in turn produced various critiques, such as hearing Kanye describing lines of cocaine on a Black woman’s skin as like stripes on a zebra while we see the fierce clash of police and protestors.[4]

Overall the music video is direct, powerful, well shot and edited. The imagery appropriates anarchist Black Bloc tactics (more familiar in Europe than the United States) in which all protestors are dressed in black with masks, sunglasses, etc. hiding their faces. This tactic makes the group anonymous and harder to identify later, and also it’s more threatening at the moment of the confrontation. Of course the police, with face and body shields and gas masks, also lose individual identity and also become part of a mass. This effect in the video is exaggerated, with the confrontation being filmed in increasing darkness with figures often in silhouette when shown, and with smoke (from tear gas) also obscuring detail. Cutaways to neoclassical public statues, as if they are onlookers, provide spare recognition.

The strongest and most emotionally effective part of the video is the representation of defiance to constituted authority (the state, the police) by the demonstrators who commence the street fighting. The most powerful leading image here is the very opening in which a single figure with a Molotov cocktail lights the incendiary weapon, approaches the police line, and hurls it at the cops. The male figure is marked as a large black man whose figure is an associative visual expression of the voices of Jay Z and Kanye West, themselves

large strong black men, whose lyrics here are bold, aggressive, defiant.

[Go to page 2](#)

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[To top](#)

[Print version](#)

[JC 56](#)

[Jump Cut home](#)



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# ***JUMP CUT***

A REVIEW OF CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

## "No Church in the Wild" image sequence



1. The video opens in near silence as we see and hear a lighter ignite a Molotov cocktail (click, whoosh) CU.



2. The music begins. A large leading figure backed by his fellows hurls the Molotov cocktail. Most of the action cuts back and forth from the police line to the protestor line down the narrow defile of an urban street. A certain amount of fog, heavy shadow, and a monochrome color palette serves to highlight the yellow flame.



3. After throwing the bottle the leader raises his arms in defiance, giving the “fuck you “ gesture with both hands which is echoed by his fellows.



4. After the protestors rush the police we have a quick montage of the clash with police shown to dominate with tear gas and pepper spray in the face of individuals they catch, horseback police beating individuals with batons, and other assaults. A fallen black man is menaced by a fierce police dog. The close-ups tend to show the civilians in fear and pain.

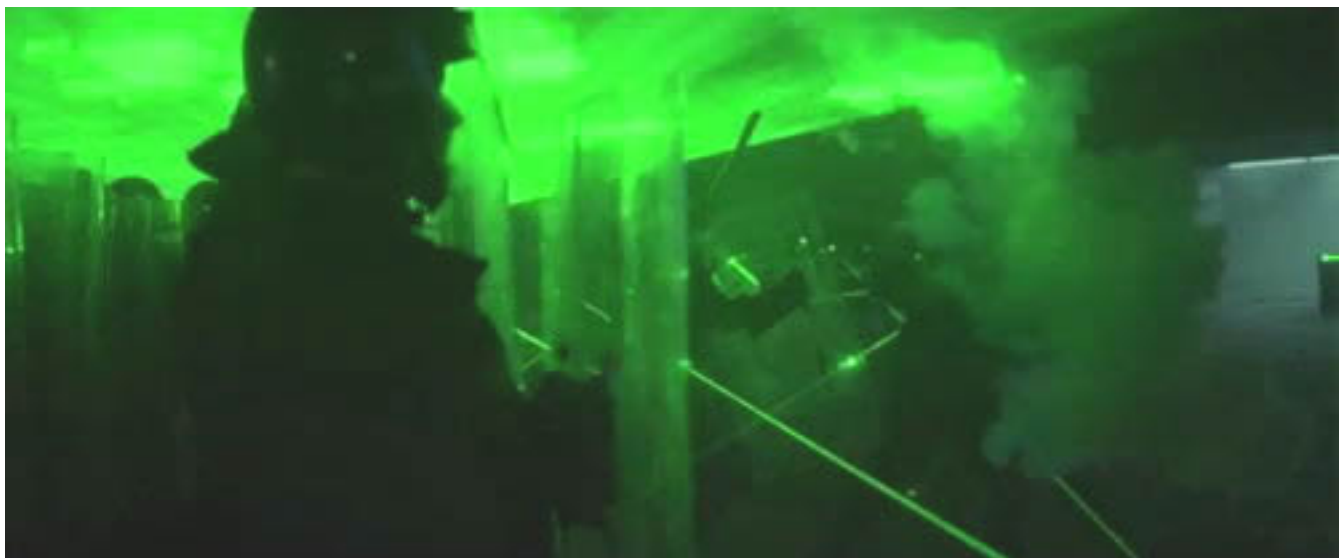


5. The already dark and obscure scene turns more to night with flames from fires set by the protestors, overturning cars, pushing a flaming police car into the police lines.





6. New Molotov cocktails penetrate the police line sending long trails of flaming gasoline. Using the z axis as the line of flame movement in the deeply silhouetted scene combines contrasting color and movement to heighten drama.



7. As the scene becomes even more obscure due to smoke/tear gas clouds. A new element appears with neon green laser lights, familiar as gun sight target tools. But these also flash on and off giving an impression reminiscent of the use of lasers in concert venues. Police menace on the street is vaguely associative with the experience of hearing Jay Z and Kanye West on the sound track as if in an arena show.



8. Again the initial Molotov cocktail thrower faces off against the police line,

arms raised in a repetition of the theme of defiance.



9. In the finale, after a cop engulfed in flames runs back to the police line and collapses, the image returns to another triumphant image of the protestors, this time joined by a rampant elephant, unexplained and not seen before in the video.

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If we try to think about the music video and ask about its meaning, things get sticky. We can say it represents something vague and general, such as “defiance,” which would let us account for the images of fighting with the police and for the lyrics, even when they refer to something quite remote from the events displayed, such as lines of cocaine or the ethics of “open marriage” relationships. But perhaps this is the best we can do given the severe dissociation of image track and music track.

The work does have a pretty radical form in terms of the disassociation of image and music. But is that politically radical or a flaw? We never learn what the protestors are protesting. Many of the mostly white protestors look like skinheads and the European equivalent of violent youth who actively attack immigrants and minorities and support an extreme right political stance. How should that be read? But this video also shows a racially mixed group. Certainly it does have powerful content in images of street fighting. And that might remind us of the romantic fantasy heroic anthems of an earlier era: the Rolling Stone’s “Street Fighting Man” (1968), the Jefferson Airplane’s “Volunteers” (1969), and even the more skeptical/dubious songs of the Beatles’ “Revolution,” (1968) or the Beach Boys “Student Demonstration Time.” (1971).

However, in the video there is no particular political point being developed, it seems. Instead the visceral thrill of street fighting appears as the emotionally engaging part of the “defiance” theme. There’s come to be a name for this kind of media, “riot porn.” According to the Urban Dictionary site:

“Various forms of media that show people rioting, protesting, or striking that is watched for enjoyment value. Usually involves



excessive police force and brutality.”

“I wanted to go to bed at a reasonable hour but stayed up till 3 AM watching riot porn on youtube.”[5]

[\[open endnotes in new window\]](#)

Riot Porn is usually dismissed by the left on political grounds as viewers just seeking the thrill of anti-authoritarian action rather than contributing to an effective grassroots movement for change. (There is a defense of it on affective grounds which I will detail later.)

If we look for my third measure, sincere intention, it seems the answer is “clearly not.” For the musicians: this is just another song, well within common rap themes. For the filmmaker: it might well be a calling card film in a bid to be the next Zach Snyder (*300*, *Sucker Punch*, *Man of Steel*, etc.).

Let me offer a political critique. Is this video subversive? Well, it depends. In a general way, both lyrics and images challenge the dominant power structure, dominant mainstream values. But does it really go very far? Rap music is always about a confrontation with “power,” yet it is itself part of the dominant commercial music system—especially at the level of Jay Z and Kanye West who are multi-millionaires, earning money through concerts and music royalties. Romain Gavras’ video can also be read as a spectacular image out of an action movie. So the video recycles images of transgression, but is it also really transgressive in itself?

Gavras’ video can also be read as a spectacular image out of an action movie. When I see the image of the rampant elephant in the last shots, I always think of a producer running up to Gavras on the set, jubilant: “We have enough money in the budget to rent the elephant!” As someone who has participated in various civil demonstrations, marches, and events where the demonstrators faced armed vigilantes, or hostile police we assumed might attack us, and so forth, the elephant is such a level of hyperbole that I can only be amused. “Don’t forget to bring your elephant” to the next demonstration. When I made this point in my talk at SF State, someone objected and argued that it was an easily understood symbol of uprising, like the rampant lion statues in Eisenstein’s *October*. I said in response: that the entire five minute music video had no larger narrative frame in contrast to well known dramatic fiction depictions of political rebellion such as Eisenstein’s *October* (1928), Kubrick’s *Spartacus* (1960), Pontecorvo’s *Burn!* (1969) or Sergio Giral’s *The Other Francisco* (1975). Rather than using the images in the way that they appear in such clearly politically motivated films, the music video strikes me as basically a calling card piece to show prospective producers. “No Church in the Wild” shows the director could work in the same vein as say, Zach Snyder. Snyder has made a reputation for spectacular action sequences which often go completely over the top (the battle rhino in *300*, the steampunk battlefield in *Sucker Punch*, etc.). Romain Gavras has made his bid.

Where the music video, “No Church In The Wild,” works fairly effectively is on

the level of fantasy affect. It makes street fighting look like something adventurous and worth trying, if just for the thrill. There's actually a fairly thoughtful critical discussion of this aspect of "riot porn" and Black Bloc tactics that has taken place. Those who put a positive spin on this kind of imagery tend to read it as a gateway tactic to recruit (especially) white middle class youth to the political struggle. (Note well: this means males, and carries the peculiar ideology that people of color are already "politicized.")

But to return to the question, just how subversive is this music video? The short answer is "that depends." There's a well-developed leftist critique of this kind of anarchist confrontationism. First of all, it involves a superficial attack on symbols (smashing the windows at Starbucks doesn't stop neoliberal globalization). Second, it is a tactic that is easily infiltrated by police provocateurs, whose goal is to provoke protestors into acts for which they can be arrested. And in the media, the protestors then lose public support by picturing them as dangerous to the public good. Third, street fighting has been used as a cynical recruiting tool by miniscule groups. They aim to show they're tough, the rightful leaders. They deliberately intend to provoke police. They imagine this will make them appear to be the radical vanguard.[6] Fourth, the tactic opens a space for police to take on greater powers by seeming to be the guardians of peace and security. Further, direct aggression against police is not widely supported by the masses of people under most circumstances and can be manipulated by the dominant media. Street rioting confuses spontaneous militancy (which is thrilling for participants) with effective action that has a long-range effect. It is founded in a confusion of tactic and strategy.

We might remember here an old left adage: "Terrorism is People's War without the people." That is, the actual process of guerilla warfare or asymmetrical war uses some of the same tactics, but in the case of riot porn, what is lost is the political logic of understanding action itself as a developmental process with various interacting phases. Effective political change involves legislative and electoral action, challenges within the legal system, community organizing, nonviolent direct action, and on occasion violent action. The underlying strategy of mass mobilizations as public displays of noncompliance and protest can show the community's depth of sentiment and the range of the population committed to change. Anarchist "propaganda of the deed" is an elitist attempt to cut short the long hard work of organizing a democratic base. It appeals to emotion rather than rational self-interest, political ideals, and community solidarity.

Another way to think about this would be by referring to some of our own recent history. "No Church in the Wild" is now three years old. But rather than this dramatic fiction, let's look at some documentary images. These are from a standard Google image search for "Ferguson," meaning the protests at Ferguson, Missouri, around the police shooting of Michael Brown in summer 2014. Subsequent protests followed the grand jury acquittal of the policeman involved in the fall.[7]









1. Probably the image that most directly invokes “No Church in the Wild” is this one of a large black man hurling an incendiary tear gas canister back at the police. It is especially dramatic in highlighting his pitching stance, his U.S. flag T-shirt, his very long dreadlocks, the fire and smoke of the gas, the two onlookers who seem to be cheering him on, and so forth.[8] [[open endnotes in new window](#)]



2. The “classic” Ferguson image during the first days of the protest. Civilian demonstrator with hands raised in the “Don’t Shoot” surrender gesture against combat armed police SWAT teams with weapons drawn and aimed at unarmed protestor. This type of image immediately raised awareness about the problem of increasing police militarization since 9/11.



3. Another news photo using similar nighttime lighting with backlit smoke from tear gas.



4. Again black bodies under dramatic smoke-filled backlighting. The protests took place on hot summer nights, and many of the male youth were shirtless, or used the shirt as a barrier to the tear gas. Bottles of water were carried to wash off the gas residue.





5. Shooting under available light and backlighting produced dramatic silhouettes, here with a female protestor giving the “fuck you” to the police line. The familiar McDonald’s Golden Arches sign references one of the first geographic reference points for the demonstrations.



6. A virtual chorus line of protestors with the now familiar “don’t shoot” upraised arms.



7. In November, anticipating new protests when the grand jury report would be released (at 8 p.m. on a Monday night) cops line up outside the police headquarters under a Christmas Holiday banner.

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Anyone and everyone familiar with basic image analysis would immediately see the similarities between the news photos and the fictional music video. And they would also be immediately aware that the news photo images don't tell any "truth," are not themselves "visible evidence," without additional contexting: the caption, the explanation, the on-the-scene report by the photographer or other eyewitnesses as to the "meaning" of what is captured in the image. All that is basic image semiotics, raising the question of history: of fact, and interpretation.

If I were teaching an introductory class in visual media this semester, I'd probably have the students do something in terms of making a photo essay or a montage or collage from these images (and others they could find on Google), and then complicate it with captions, editing for rhythm, maybe adding different soundtracks. What would we make of the music track of "No Church in the Wild" if accompanied by a mashup of Ferguson still and moving images? The aim of such an exercise would be having the students see the different aspects of such images, how juxtaposition and framing work, how captions or voice over work. In other words, there is a politics to this, and a historical grounding here (and importantly whatever side we take).[9]

History, and the politics of history, are the "reality check" on subversion. Does this fly? Riot porn is image art that celebrates and depicts violent confrontation with authorities, usually the police. Some of it is locally generated (documentaries of protests and actions), some of it is in corporate media (the popular video game Grand Theft Auto can stand for a huge assortment of such material).[10]

## Two asides

While I don't have the space to develop full arguments here, on further thought after getting feedback at the conference and reading a bit more on riot porn, there are two more issues I'd like to note. I'll develop a new discussion of them in later writings, because they are important to consider in depth. One is making the case for riot porn; the other is discussing the role of affect or emotion in radical media art.

There has been an expanding discussion of riot porn among people trying to analyze the politics of social media/digital media. Leah A. Lievrouw's *Alternative and Activist New Media* (Cambridge UK: Polity Press Digital Media and Society Series, 2011) provides an expansive survey based largely on the academic secondary literature with a good discussion of Indymedia and a chapter, "Getting People on the "Street": Mediated mobilization." In *Transgression 2.0: Media, Culture, and the Politics of a Digital Age*, ed. David J. Gunkel and Ted Gornelios (NY: Continuum, 2012) critics survey a wide variety of counter media ranging from alternative journalism, pornography, particular fandoms (e.g. the *Saw* series of horror films). Included is a survey of anarchist inspired riot porn by Michael Truscello, "Social Media and the Representation of Summit Protests: YouTube, Riot Porn, and the Anarchist Tradition." Truscello expands the framework to consider political activists who are both for and against the trend. As an extended monograph, *Digital Rebellion: The Birth of the Cyber Left* by Todd Wolfson (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014), presents a greater historical and international range and contains a thoughtful line of political argument critiquing the weaknesses of the "horizontal" organizing pattern of Indymedia and the Occupy Movement.[11]

Perhaps the most compelling argument for riot porn can be found in Maple John Razsa's article "Beyond 'Riot Porn': Protest Video and the production of Unruly Subjects," *Ethos: Journal of Anthropology*, 79:4, 496-24.[12] Based in ethnographic fieldwork with a small Croatian anarchist group, Razsa reports the fervent enthusiasm the young activists have for riot porn.

From the abstract:

"... Many appropriations of the technology, including those by human rights advocates, rest on the theory that 'seeing is believing' .... While I encountered such realist uses of video during fieldwork with direct action movements in the former Yugoslavia, activists are also preoccupied with videos depicting the most physical confrontations with the police, videos they sometimes referred to as 'riot porn'. They engage these videos for the sensory, affective and bodily experiences they facilitate. Indeed, activist practices around and claims for video indicate that they understand video as a technology of the self, using it to forge emotional relationships with activists elsewhere, steel themselves for physical confrontation and cultivate new political desires."

Razsa both reports on and adds his own criticism of the group's attitudes (and those of other European anarchists) giving the dramatic example of videos which are simply international mashups of street fighting with no specificity of place, date, time, issues, etc. The thrill of watching violent confrontation takes over.[13]

Closely related, the issue of the emotional nature of radical media has often been neglected in left film theory and criticism. Perhaps because right wing critics often point at left films as romantic fantasies, or hagiography, or pure propaganda, the left has tended to be defensive, even silent about this. In addition, for the last half-century progressive film theory has tended to validate the cool, rational style of strict formalist frameworks rather than emotive aesthetics.[14]

While obviously radical media has access to the whole range of emotions from humor to sorrow, from heroic thrill to dramatic fear, there is a longstanding tradition of working sympathy for purposes of persuasion. The melodramatic appeal of sympathy for victims and admiration for resistance and rebellion are common features of realist documentary and naturalist narrative. Combined with spectacle and familiar stories such as the embattled small band or lone rebel, such works easily evoke well-trained responses.



Although above I gave a specifically political critique of riot porn in the context of the limits of (many) anarchist tactics and strategies, I would not assert that emotion itself is negligible radical media work. To provide a simplified background we can remember one of the classic lines of thought in Western aesthetics. In laying out his ideal Republic, Plato argued against art's mimetic qualities as dangerous, inherently deceptive, because people would be influenced imitate bad behaviors if viewed. Only exemplary attitudes such as hymns and praise for leaders would be allowed. Famously Aristotle answered the objections by proposing catharsis in his poetics of tragedy. Yes, he agreed, tragedy can show bad behavior such as murdering one's children or defying constituted authority, but the bad emotions that are depicted and aroused are washed away by the dramatic conclusion. The audience doesn't leave the theatre with politically incorrect feelings and ideas but those things are released, mellowed out, in the experience. Again, famously, Brecht argued against this Aristotelian theatre. (Perhaps most obviously in the naturalist-realist form of Ibsen's well-made drama, and even more conventionally in its commercial stage forms.) Brecht wanted people to think, and go beyond the emotional pleasures of a self contained theatrical experience. This was often taken up in the 1960s and 70s film theory by eschewing all emotion. The ideal was a hyper-rational work that used strict form to repress the affective dimension of art: a denial of emotion (except perhaps for high irony).

Actually Brecht was not pushing for a formal renunciation of emotion, but he argued for a model close to the cabaret or boxing match where, gathered with others, one might experience an intense engagement with the songs and performance or the round of punching, and then in the interval relax and discuss, reflect on and converse about what one had just experienced. Rather than being swept away on a tide of emotions, one would also have retrospective and critical experience. Room to think about it.

While I'm just being speculative here, I'd offer that there is a significant difference between the emotional dimensions of political and historical dramas on the one hand and those of purely speculative fictions on the other. In the first category we might test this with a film such as *Battleship Potemkin* (Eisenstein, 1925) which does brilliantly evoke the justice of mutiny, although it also has to deal with the issue of the failure of the 1905 revolt's failure while ending on an obligatory triumphal note. In contrast, "No Church in the Wild", has no historical dimension. And as a counter example we could consider the rather large category of dystopian future films. Does *Snowpiercer* (Bong Joon-Ho, 2013), for example, while clearly a fantasy also provide a certain emotional force and pleasure by postulating the eventual success of a class rebellion that ends in a hopeful future? The question needs more investigation.

[Go to page 4](#)

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[To top](#)   [Print version](#)   [JC 56](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)



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### A shift of terms

The examples that I've worked with here so far are pitched in a very masculine and confrontational vein. That's because I wanted to present and critique what is often thought to be the most subversive, the most radical, the most self-evidently challenging to the dominant order, to the taken for granted. But there's another way to think of subversion, one often overlooked precisely because it is imbedded in the commonplace, in the everyday. Understanding this too depends on thinking of contingency, of the audience, of the powers that are present, of working within institutions.

I'm going to discuss a few illustrative moments from a 46-minute documentary made for Turkish state television. Presenting women caring for newborns, babies, and infants, it is titled *Lullaby* (Ninni, 2003) and is by a Turkish woman producer/director, Zehra Tülin Sertöz.[15] (I'm preparing a longer article on several of her works; here, just a sampler.) [\[open endnotes in new window\]](#)

To understand why and how it is gently subversive, you need to understand the larger historical context of Turkey, and of the role of TRT, Turkey Radio-Television, a state agency. Turkey is one of the most modernized and Westernized nations in the Middle East. Strategically positioned, with Arab neighbors to the south and east, and Soviet power to the north, it had a long period of military rulers in the post WW2 era, finally becoming more democratic. Since the 1980s the economy has grown, but so has income inequality and class antagonism. This has fueled Islamic populism and the current government reflects that. At the same time, Turkey has dealt harshly with the Kurdish independence movement within its borders, and it has a long-standing record of imprisoning critical journalists.[16]

Within this framework, Turkey has been relatively liberal in terms of giving women education and an active role in social life in more urban areas. Given that State Television exists to validate the existing dominant values, some of which silence women, or ignore them, or neglect their voice, how can you give women an expressive presence? Particularly poor women, women in remote and rural areas, women whose very language is actively repressed on television if they speak Kurdish, or is seldom heard if they are migrant agricultural laborers from Syria (and therefore speaking Arabic, not Turkish). How do you make a documentary about women, when in traditional communities a *spokesman* would report what women thought and said?

The answer for Sertöz's poetic imagination was to make a film about a subject in which women were the experts, and had knowledge that men didn't. Thus organizing the film around the fact and metaphor of the lullaby allowed women to speak, to sing, to tell about their experience in their own native languages and dialects, and from all over the country, ranging from rich to poor, from rural isolation and migrant labor to successful urban professionals and wealthy couples. We also hear from elders who talk of the old days, and young new mothers who have the latest technologies at hand.

*Lullaby* weaves a complex investigation of the practices and materials of infancy and women's domestic labor. Here two passages that deal with past social norms and current rural agricultural workers:[17]

### *Lullaby* visual essay





The film is bookended with two heart-warming sequences. The first presents a midwife attending a newborn (the soundtrack begins with the baby's first cries). The conclusion shows a small herd of lambs greeting their mothers (and vice versa) at the end of a day of grazing. Bleats and nursing as the sun sets makes for a natural sentimentalism.

Within this framework, the film raises issues of women's double day and class differences with the women speaking directly. The narrator-director at other points makes a rather poetic statement on how all mothers hope that their child will not have to live through a war, and asks why people can be so protective of their baby but not extend that concern to all babies.



There were no cradles then.



We had lots of work to do, we didn't have time for lullabies.



Now women are free, they sing lullabies and do anything they want.

Two elders offer their stories, contrasting the old and the new. Visual details offer additional thoughts: younger women present seem to express that they've heard this matriarch's opinions many times before.[1] [\[open notes in new window\]](#) The Adidas stocking cap seems an ironic touch for a speaker dismissive of the younger generation's mores.

Narrator (Serto) *How did you put your children to sleep?*

*God put them to sleep, not us. We used to stroke them as we nursed them. I used to lay the baby here. I nursed it and patted its back. It was work time for us. We put them to sleep then go to get water. Work in the field, do the house chores....We couldn't sit for an hour to nurse them. We nursed them for half an hour, then got back to work. There were no cradles then. Now we rock them in cradles.*

*We had lots of work to do, we didn't have time for lullabies. Now women are free, they sing lullabies and do anything they want. We didn't have time. We used to sing lullabies and songs when we had time.*



We leave it beneath a vine and work.



We're workers, we're suppressed people.



Bugs sing them lullabies, dust and dirt fill their ears.

In a vineyard:

*We can't sing lullabies. We go back to work in the field when the baby is 40 days old. We leave it behind a vine and work. We're workers, we're suppressed people. I don't know how to sing a lullaby as a mother. You live in the city you are up until midnight and sleep late. We go to bed in the evening and get up at 4 or 5 in the morning. We have to prepare the lunch also the baby's*



diapers, etc. We leave the baby beneath a vine. If the boss is a kind man, he lets us take care of our babies. Otherwise, the baby cries there and you work to earn your living. Poverty is such a hard thing. Ants sing them lullabies in the morning. Bugs sing them lullabies, dust and dirt fill their ears.



Narrator: Somewhere at the heart of Anatolia between Yozgat and Sivas, a small green tent in the middle of a field...could it be made to shelter food against the sun? Or is there a baby lying beneath it? But they wouldn't leave a baby alone in the middle of a field. When we come closer we see there's indeed a baby under it. It's name is Ahmet, Mehmet, Mustafa or Osman. This is how his life story has begun....As his cells multiply rapidly in deep sleep...the noise of the hoes becomes his lullaby. This lullaby will only end when the sugar beet is fully hoed. Or when the dowry is earned for the uncle.[2]

Spokesman (standing next to infant under a tent). We had a miserable life. He will have exactly the same life. We didn't have a choice.



Narrator. A few kilometers away there are two other babies...sleeping on the edge of a field under a tractor which gives the only shadow in the field. One is in a swing tied with ropes, the other in an iron cradle.

Narrator to young girl tending the baby:

What's she having?

Biscuits.

What else?

Boiled water

(girl makes soft rhythmic sounds)

Narrator. Cradles out of rags, cradles of rusty iron and cradles of solid gold.

This golden cradle in the Topkapi Palace inlaid with emeralds and rubies is a cradle for princes

Here is subversion in a different key. Women speak, they sing, in different voices, languages, and dialects. They are the authorities, operating in the practical, the everyday, the world. Of course this means listening, viewing, understanding in a different way: with an expanded and expansive analysis of what is political. That means attending to the local situation (the when and where), to contingency, and to seeing media as part of an historical process, itself in change, offering different possibilities through time.

[Go to Notes page](#)

[To top](#)   [Print version](#)   [JC 56](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)



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### Notes

#### Notes

1. This essay was first presented as a keynote address at the “Quiet Revolutions: Politically Subversive Cinema Conference” at San Francisco State University in October 2014. I want to thank the host students, who organized the annual event, especially Erin Weigand. Many useful comments there gave me additional thoughts which were then further framed by the events immediately following the grand jury report in late November 2014 on the Ferguson shooting as I was revising the essay. Special thanks as well to SFSU faculty Aaron Kerner and R. L. Rutsky. [[return to page 1](#)]

2. YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FJt7gNi3Nr4>.

Production details on Wikipedia:

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/No\\_Church\\_in\\_the\\_Wild](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/No_Church_in_the_Wild)

Lyrics: <http://genius.com/Kanye-west-no-church-in-the-wild-lyrics>

3. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/No\\_Church\\_in\\_the\\_Wild](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/No_Church_in_the_Wild)

4. Four images with captions:





Images A. and B. While Kanye West sings, the accompanying images include a view from inside a police car as it is assaulted by the mob of protestors, and one-on-one attacks on the police line.

Audio, lyrics: *Coke on her black skin made a stripe like a zebra.  
I call that jungle fever.*



Image C. Kanye continues as we see a protestor attack a mounted policeman with a pole, knocking the cop off his horse.

Audio, lyrics: *And deception is the only felony.  
So never fuck nobody wit'out tellin' me.*



Image D. We see protestors push a police car, in flames, at the police line.

Audio, lyrics: *“Love is cursed by monogamy.”*

5. <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Riot+Porn>  
[[return to page 2](#)]

6. Of course it may actually be that they are the most vulnerable, easy pickings for the police to boost their arrest statistics.

7. Here I'm working from simply "ferguson." You can refine the search with additional terms such as "protest," "riots," "police" (which brings forward many pro-police images), etc.

8. Even the street sign carries a political significance. Ferguson, a very small suburb within the great St. Louis metro area, like many area village sized communities with a white power structure and police force and a large and underrepresented black population, depends heavily on earning money off of traffic violations and thus has many exceptionally low speed limits designed to entrap inattentive motorists who pass from one suburb to another without noticing an abrupt change. This effectively supports lower property taxes for municipal services (advantaging whites) and combined with racial profiling in traffic stops, disadvantages African American residents and people passing through on the main streets. [[return to page 3](#)]

9. The first page on a Google image search provides refinements, including "police" which tends to provide more positive images of law enforcement, often implying they are protectors rather than menacers.

10. Given its years of development through different versions GTA has acquired a substantial critical literature analyzing it, as well as fanboy appreciations of the game. People unfamiliar with shooter video games might want to look at State of Emergency for Playstation (2002). A YouTube link for a game walk-through:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qifAvyl-IQI>

The game's premise is a small band of warriors must take on a dystopic future dictatorship by "The Corporation" by shooting their way through a shopping mall, etc. Anyone with images from the past decade of U.S. mass killings (perhaps most famously Columbine high school or the Aurora Colorado shopping mall at a screening of *The Dark Knight Rises*) could easily read the murderous events as a re-enactment of the videogame fiction.

11. Also pertinent here, the discussions of activist media in this issue of *Jump Cut*: Chris Robé, Angela Aguayo, Ernie Larsen. Richard Porton's *Film and the Anarchist Imagination* (NY: Verso, 1999) provides excellent background to anarchist aesthetics.

12. His book, *Bastards of Utopia: Living Radical Politics after Socialism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015) is forthcoming in Spring 2015. It accompanies his 2010 feature film done with Pacho Velez.

13. In a brief recent email exchange where I pointed at "No Church in the Wild," Razsa wondered how the fictional nature of the Jay Z and Kanye West



video functioned given that his ethnographic subjects always viewed the work they were watching as “documentary.” My own view is that the affective result (which is what his subjects value) is the same whether documentary or fiction. But I’d withhold final judgment until I can read the book length study and see the Razsa and Velez film.

14. I’m thinking here of a wide variety of work, much of which I admire, as represented by Jean-Marie Straub and Danielle Huillet, Haroun Farocki, Yvonne Rainer, Dan Eisenberg, Ernie Gehr, some of Godard’s more documentary work, Laura Mulvey and Peter Wollen, and Trinh T. Minh-Ha.

15. A DVD is available from TRT’s Market site:

[http://www.trtmarket.net/?kategori\\_22\\_DVD\\_ler.html](http://www.trtmarket.net/?kategori_22_DVD_ler.html)

*Lullaby* (Ninni) is DVD 52.

Full disclosure, she is a friend and former student. [[return to page 4](#)]

16. The film was made in 2003. Since then, major regional events have created new regional shifts, especially with the US Iraq War creating new configurations of Kurdish aspirations and autonomy. The Syrian civil war produced one million Syrian refugees in Turkey, and the rise of ISIS establishes a new imbalance.

17. Agriculture only amounts to about 8% of the national economy, but employs 25% of the total labor force.

## Image notes

1. The speaker's native tongue is Arabic and women of her generation received hardly any formal education, so her remarks (in Turkish) are heavily accented. [[return to visual essay, page 4](#)]

2. This group of migrant workers come from Southeast Turkey and must travel to find work. In Spring they are involved in planting, in Fall harvesting. Marriages take place in August. The baby's actual uncle must earn enough money before August to have a wedding with his betrothed.

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[To top](#)   [Print version](#)   [JC 56](#)   [Jump Cut home](#)



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